

## Earth-Friendly Gardening & Landscaping



# Alien Invaders in Your Yard

Alien invaders are in our midst!

They may not be blood-slurping killer carrots from outer space, but they are here all the same. In forests and meadows, wetlands and public parks, non-native invasive plants are on the march. Earthlings beware!

Each year, exotic invasive plants take over an area eight times the size of Montgomery County, leading to billions of dollars in agricultural and forest product losses, and billions more in control costs. Your backyard may well represent a small but important skirmish in this chilling invasion scenario.

Invasive plants often dominate our personal landscapes. Often we inherit a property overrun with Japanese honeysuckle and English ivy, while at other times we ourselves are unwitting co-conspirators by purchasing and planting these exotic species, many of which represent the backbone of sales for garden centers, especially where groundcovers are concerned.

Of course, selecting these traditional invasive species is understandable enough. Non-native plants are generally inexpensive, readily available, and easy to maintain; after all, they really do grow and spread like weeds. And that is just part of the problem.

Non-native invaders damage our environment in numerous ways. The green scourge of kudzu has effectively conquered seven million acres of forest at a loss of 50 million dollars, and is now romping through wooded areas in our region. It smothers trees up to 100 feet

tall, and overwhelms the natural landscape, much like multiflora rose, Asian wisteria, porcelain berry, and sharp-barbed mile-a-minute vine.

But there is an even more insidious side to this invasion. Exotic species also out-compete and replace native plants like horticultural body snatchers. This loss of native plants represents an overall loss of habitat and food sources for native wildlife. Consider the impact of the Bradford pear and its overuse as a street and landscape tree. Unlike a native ornamental tree, such as a viburnum or red chokeberry, which can provide food for dozens of bird species, the brittle Bradford pear attracts only European starlings, a winged plague in their own right, which help carry the

invader's seeds far and wide in an example of sinister symbiosis.

English ivy is another example. It displaces native groundcovers, inevitably escapes into natural areas, and eventually mutates from groundcover to tree strangler. Even well-manicured ivy beds around the home are potential fifth-columnists, as the seeds produced by the vine are favored by non-native birds, like our pesky starlings, and distributed over a wide area far beyond your backyard.

Unfortunately, the invasion can never be completely halted. Once a non-native species is successfully introduced, it is almost impossible to eradicate it completely. However, we can strike an effective blow for biodiversity in several important ways.



First, know your enemy. Find out more about which species are invasive, and NEVER consider purchasing or planting them. Besides those already mentioned, it is disappointing to note that a number of other vicious invaders are still sold as landscape ornamentals, including porcelain berry, Oriental bittersweet, and Japanese honeysuckle. Also invasive are popular groundcover standards like periwinkle and bugleweed (*Ajuga*). And, to aggravate the problem, mail order and Internet shopping has encouraged homeowners to buy species which should not be planted locally, or otherwise offer false claims about a specific variety being non-invasive. For example, horticultural writer Kathleen Fisher notes that gardeners in the Washington metro area continue to plant purple loosestrife, an unstoppable invader of wetlands, perhaps due to an erroneous newspaper article touting a sterile cultivar. Not true. Keep away from this marauder and plant gayfeather (*Liatris*) instead.

Next, seek sensible alternatives. Most of the desirable characteristics sought in exotic species can be found in native plants. Substitute native ferns, golden ragwort, green-and-gold, native ginger, or Allegheny spurge for invasive groundcovers. Or, at least, select a non-invasive groundcover, such as pachysandra or sweet woodruff.

Invasive and almost clichéd hedges and foundation plantings like burning bush, euonymus and Japanese barberry are more handsomely replaced with avian favorites such as winterberry, beautyberry, or inkberry. Privacy plantings like Leyland cypress and the double threat of autumn and Russian olive can be replaced with American holly or eastern redcedar.

Exotic species are very often easily identified by their common names: Japanese honeysuckle, Norway maple, Asian wisteria,

Chinese bittersweet — and they are just as easily replaced by their native American counterparts, all of which are better suited to our bioregion, and more suitable for our resident wildlife.

Lastly, take up arms against the invaders. It is not going to be an easy fight. Ivy and honeysuckle will need to be cut, yanked, and grubbed up from the soil. And the fight will not be won overnight. Eradicating the most aggressive vines and groundcovers will require constant vigilance and patience. Addressing larger plants, like shrubs and ornamental trees, will require some soul searching. It is never emotionally easy to cut down a tree, with the exception of a Bradford pear, which has probably lost half of its branches already. Moreover, a significant financial investment has often been made in these plantings. Perhaps the best solution in these cases is to defuse some of the alien invasion by expanding your current landscaping plan to include numerous native planting areas.

### Invasive Alien Species

#### Trees

Catalpa *Catalpa* spp.  
Empress Tree *Paulownia tomentosa*  
**Norway Maple** *Acer platanoides*  
Sweet Cherry, Bird Cherry *Prunus avium*  
**Tree of Heaven** *Ailanthus altissima*  
White Mulberry *Morus alba*  
White Poplar *Populus alba*  
White Spruce *Picea glauca*

#### Vines

**Cinnamon Vine** *Dioscorea oppositifolia*  
Climbing Euonymus *Euonymus fortunei*  
**English Ivy** *Hedera helix*  
**Japanese Honeysuckle** *Lonicera japonica*  
**Kudzu\*** *Pueraria lobata*  
**Mile-a-minute** *Polygonum perfoliatum*  
**Oriental Bittersweet** *Celastrus orbiculatus*  
Periwinkle *Vinca minor*  
**Porcelain Berry** *Ampelopsis brevipedunculata*  
Wisteria *Wisteria floribunda*, *W. sinensis*

#### Herbaceous Plants

Beefsteak Mint *Perilla frutescens*  
**Bull Thistle\*** *Cirsium vulgare*  
**Canada Thistle\*** *Cirsium arvense*  
Common Daylily *Hemerocallis fulva*  
Creeping Bugleweed *Ajuga reptans*  
Creeping Lilyturf *Liriope spicata*  
Crown-vetch *Coronilla varia*  
Eulalia (ornamental grass) *Miscanthus sinensis*  
**Garlic Mustard** *Alliaria petiolata* (*A. officinalis*)  
Giant Chickweed *Myosoton aquaticum*  
Giant Knotweed *Polygonum sachalinense*  
Ground Ivy *Glechoma hederacea*  
Henbit *Lamium amplexicaule*  
Indian Strawberry *Duchesnea indica*  
**Japanese Knotweed** *Polygonum cuspidatum*  
**Japanese Stiltgrass** *Microstegium vimineum*  
**Johnsongrass\*** *Sorghum halepense*  
**Lesser Celandine** *Ranunculus ficaria*  
Moneywort *Lysimachia nummularia*  
Mugwort *Artemisia vulgaris*  
Musk Thistle\* *Carduus nutans*  
Nodding Star of Bethlehem *Ornithogalum umbellatum*  
Plumeless Thistle\* *Carduus acanthoides*  
**Purple Dead Nettle** *Lamium purpureum*  
**Purple Loosestrife** *Lythrum salicaria*  
**Reed Canary Grass** *Phalaris arundinacea*  
**Shattercane** *Sorghum bicolor*  
Spotted Knapweed *Centaurea maculosa*  
Star of Bethlehem *Ornithogalum nutans*  
Tall Fescue, K31 Fescue *Festuca elatior*  
Wild Garlic\* *Allium vineale*

**Boldface** type indicates species designated as "Most Serious Threat to Natural Areas" by Maryland Dept. of Natural Resources.  
\*Regulated by state or federal law.

#### Weed Warriors Wanted

Area residents can take their struggle against alien invasive plants from their backyards to local Montgomery County parks. Carole Bergmann, forest ecologist for the Maryland National Capital Park and Planning Commission, is recruiting volunteers to monitor, control, and remove non-native vegetation from the county's 32,000 acres of parkland. Training to work as an individual or group member is provided *and required*. Call 301.495.2464 to register. For other information, call 301.495.2504.



The **GreenMan Show** is produced for County Cable Montgomery by the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) and the Office of Public Information. It airs daily on Cable Channel 6 and can also be

viewed on the Internet. For a complete schedule and online access, visit [www.greenmanshow.com](http://www.greenmanshow.com).

Joe Keyser is the author of the GreenMan column for the *Gazette Newspapers* in Maryland, and also host of The Greenman Show. A downloadable library of previous environmental articles, columns, and reviews are available online at [greenman.askdep.com](http://greenman.askdep.com). Print copies are also available by contacting DEP at the following locations:

#### Montgomery County Department of Environmental Protection

255 Rockville Pike, Suite 120  
Rockville, MD 20850  
240.777.7770 fax 240.777.7765  
email: [help@askdep.com](mailto:help@askdep.com)  
[www.askdep.com](http://www.askdep.com)

